

Marin nonprofits join forces to fight diabetes

Nonprofits provide screenings, advice, healthy food to low-income residents

By Richard Halstead

rhalstead@marinij.com @HalsteadRichard on Twitter

POSTED: 11/12/2014 05:11:43 PM PST



Erendira Olivas, left, diabetes program director with LIFT-Levantate, checks Aviva Shane's blood pressure as part of a diabetes screening program at Marin Community Clinic in Novato. (Robert Tong — Marin Independent Journal)

Two Marin nonprofits are teaming up to combat an epidemic of diabetes among the county's low-income population.

The Marin Community Clinics, with offices in San Rafael and Novato, is the principal provider of medical care to low-income Marin residents. San Rafael-based LIFT-Levantate provides free diabetes screenings and does community outreach, educating people about how to manage diabetes, or avoid the disease entirely, by exercising and eating healthier food.

Beginning in 2013, LIFT-Levantate's health educators and counselors began visiting the Marin Community Clinics' offices weekly. In addition to free diabetes screenings and health education, LIFT counselors also give low-income people with diabetes healthy food at no cost and offer exercise classes.



Kristi Lambert, a nurse with Marin Community Clinic, checks the blood sugar levels of Maragarita Oregon as part of a diabetes screening program at Marin Community Clinic in Novato. (Robert Tong — Marin Independent Journal)

"It's a two-way referral" relationship, said Richard Waxman, Lift-Levantate's executive director. "LIFT provides free screening at community events, schools, senior centers, in the workplace, at religious institutions, etc. and refers patients who test positive to the clinic for treatment. The clinic then refers those patients back to us for community-based education, classes, programs, healthy food and support."

"The logic was that a lot of times people need more than they can get in 15 minutes with a doctor," said Mitesh Popat, chief medical officer at the Marin Community Clinics.

Popat said that since implementation of the Affordable Care Act, Marin Community Clinics is seeing more patients than ever.

"More adults have gotten insurance, which is wonderful," Popat said. "But we're struggling a little bit to staff up."

Popat said LIFT's bilingual health educators are able to provide patients with the community follow-up that the clinic's doctors sometimes can't.

The incidence of diabetes among Marin County residents — 5 percent — is the lowest in the state, according to a report issued in May by the University of California at Los Angeles Center for Health Policy Research. But that is no reason for celebration; the report also found that one of every three patients hospitalized in California, age 35 or older, had diabetes in 2011.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that the number of diabetes cases in the United States nearly tripled between 1980 and 2010 from 5.6 million to 20.9 million. The American Diabetes Association estimates that diabetes cost the nation \$245 billion in 2012.

According to the Center for Health Policy Research study, the prevalence of diabetes was 20 percent among patients age 35 and older hospitalized in Marin. The hospitalization of Marin residents with diabetes resulted in \$7 million of additional cost in 2011, because it costs more than twice as much to treat patients with diabetes as those without the condition, the study reported.



Free diabetes screening is held at Marin Community Clinic in Novato. Marin Community Clinics and LIFT-Levantate have teamed up to combat diabetes among Marin's low income population. (Robert Tong — Marin Independent Journal)

While Marin's overall rate of diabetes is lower than other counties in California, there are pockets within the county — the Canal, Santa Venetia, Marin City, South Novato and West Marin — where rates are much higher. These communities are populated by low-income residents who have limited access to healthy, affordable food, and safe places for their children to play.

Aurora Escamilla of Novato found out she was pre-diabetic thanks to a LIFT screening three years ago. Escamilla said the diagnosis concerned her, since her mother developed diabetes and the disease damaged her kidneys.

After consulting with a doctor at Marin Community Clinics, Escamilla attended a diabetes education class offered by LIFT. Escamilla has lost weight. She has stopped drinking sugary drinks, reduced the amount of rice she eats and began participating in exercise groups organized by LIFT. LIFT provides free diabetes walking groups evenings and weekends for diabetics and their families, as well as Zumba and yoga classes at local schools, churches, recreation centers and in the workplace.

Since beginning her new regimen, Escamilla's blood glucose has decreased. She says exercising no longer feels like a chore; she now enjoys going out for walks.

Waxman said of the 600 individuals LIFT-Levantate has screened at Marin Community Clinic offices since April 2013, more than 60 percent turned out to be diabetic or pre-diabetic.

"The Latino community is especially concerned about diabetes as almost everyone has a family member, neighbor, co-worker or friend who has gone blind, had a limb amputated or died an early, uncomfortable death due to diabetes or a condition related to diabetes," Waxman said. "They are learning that prevention, diagnosis and care can actually save their lives and the lives of their loved ones."